

# Las Vegas' smallest sovereign nation

## Southern Paiutes have cultivated land and business in the valley for centuries

By [Delen Goldberg](#), [Jackie Valley](#) 

Monday, July 20, 2015 | 2 a.m.

Just north of downtown, sandwiched between Ewing Brothers Towing and Main Street, lies a sovereign nation.

The 31-acre plot of land belongs to the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe, which owns a bustling smoke shop that sits on the corner of the property, beckoning customers with low prices and a large selection of cigars and cigarettes.

Down a nondescript road called Paiute Drive are a couple dozen homes nestled in trees, a health clinic, a police department, a child development center, a community hall, an administrative building and a cemetery. The area is what tribal members refer to as “the Colony,” their headquarters since 1911, when Las Vegas ranch owner Helen Stewart deeded 10 acres to the tribe.

“There is a reason Las Vegas exists, and part of it has to do with its indigenous past,” said William Bauer, a UNLV professor who teaches Native American history.

The Las Vegas Paiutes are descendants of the Tudinu, or Desert People, who since at least 1100 A.D. lived along the Colorado River, spreading north and west into what today is Southern Nevada, Utah and California. The Grand Canyon was integral to their history and traditions.

he land as barren and harsh, the Southern Paiutes, a tribe that included more than a dozen smaller  
ons. They found natural springs and hunted for meat, birds and fish; every fall, tribe members took  
e. Tribes made use of nearly every plant available, gathering and drying edible roots, seeds and  
s, shoes and tools. The Moapa Paiutes for centuries irrigated corn and bean fields along the Muddy

he tribes left stories of their lives in petroglyph and pictographs on canyon walls in Valley of Fire  
Spring Mountains National Recreation Area and Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area. The  
bols of great spiritual importance to the tribe.

es first made contact with Europeans in the late 1700s, when a Spanish friar crossed their territory.  
ute linking Santa Fe, N.M., to Los Angeles, opened across Paiute land, bringing scores of traders

The white travelers killed the plants and animals on which the Paiutes survived and seized their water. Homes frequently were raided, and a number of Paiute children were kidnapped and sold as slaves. As a result, tribe members, traditionally friendly and welcoming, avoided newcomers.

In 1855 and 1856, Mormon missionaries, Las Vegas' first settlers, tried to convert the Paiutes, but tribe members objected. The frustrated missionaries left the area, but more settlers came.

During the 1880s, unable to keep pace with their rapidly changing environment, having had their farming disrupted and forced to flee into the desert, many Paiutes relented and began working on ranches owned by white settlers. Men cut hay and hauled wood, while women worked as maids and cooks. Many of the Paiutes adopted aspects of the white culture while keeping their traditional ways.

By 1905, railroads reached Las Vegas, and officials organized a town site, launching a spate of construction that brought more settlers to the area. With them came diseases the Paiutes had no immunity against — particularly tuberculosis and measles. By the latter half of the 19th century, much of the Paiutes' land had been claimed by ranchers. As a result of colonialism and disease, the Paiutes withered in strength and numbers.

Realizing a culture was in peril, Stewart deeded 10 acres of land, a small portion of her holdings, to the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe. But members' lives remained hardscrabble; poverty was endemic. They built their homes by flattening 5-gallon tin drums and lashing scraps of metal together. While other tribes raised cattle, many of the Las Vegas Paiutes scavenged for food at a nearby stockyard.

Elders were stoic and hesitant; they believed if outsiders knew about the tribe, they'd hurt it. It wasn't until 1970 that the federal government officially recognized the Las Vegas Paiutes as a sovereign nation.

The Paiutes' fortunes changed again in 1978 — this time for the better — when a tax-free smoke shop was erected on the reservation. The shop has brought millions of dollars in revenue to the tribe.

As the city of Las Vegas grew, so did the Las Vegas Paiutes' acreage. In 1983, Congress returned to members 4,000 acres of ancestral land in northwest Las Vegas. In 1997, the tribe added another 8 acres to the downtown reservation, including a burial ground.

Today, the 4,000 acres includes three golf courses and a clubhouse at the Las Vegas Paiute Resort, which is flanked by Sheep Mountain to the east and Mount Charleston to the west. Tule Springs, a fossil-rich wash that was declared a national monument last year, sits directly behind the golf courses.

stance.

Paiutes' ancestors used centuries ago when they split their time between Mount Charleston in summer and Tule Springs in winter. Tule Springs is a vital part of the economic livelihood of the 56 Las Vegas Paiutes living today.

development around Tule Springs, as they think it would complement the tribe's plans to build a resort could feature a spa and gaming, Tso said.

advisory committee, created by the U.S. Interior Department, to shape development on city land near the monument like oceanfront property by building restaurants and shops with outdoor seating and

to build a solar project on reservation land, Tso said.

"It's exciting because it's new to the tribe," he said. "Economically, it's going to be beneficial."

For decades, the tribe had little control over what rose around their colony downtown, so Tule Springs represents a new chapter in their history. Improved communication has created a “government-to-government” relationship as opposed to a “government-within-a-government” scenario, Tso said.

“I envision this will be the staple of the tribe within the next 15 years,” Tso said. “What serves (the city) is also going to serve us.”

There are four major tribes in Nevada

Southern Paiutes (Nuwu)

The Southern Paiutes, which once included 15 bands across Southern Nevada and the West, today includes two federally recognized bands in Nevada: the Las Vegas Paiutes and the Moapa Paiutes. A band also lives in Pahrump, but it’s not federally recognized.

The tribe has lived in the region since at least 1100 A.D. and originally survived by harvesting plants, hunting game and drinking spring water.

The Las Vegas Paiutes now operate a golf resort and smoke shops. The Moapa band owns a travel plaza off Interstate 15 and is developing a solar project on tribal land.

Washoe (Wa She Shu)

The Great Basin, a large swath of land that includes much of Nevada, has served as the Washoe tribe’s home for at least 9,000 years.

According to the Washoe’s creation story, a coyote brought the people to their homeland near Lake Tahoe, which became the geographic and spiritual center of the tribe. Tribe members lived off freshwater clams and fish, as well as plants and pine nuts. Fall hunting sustained the tribe during the cold

ns the Meeks Bay Resort on the western shore of Lake Tahoe. The tribe’s headquarters is in

ada. Members have lived near Pyramid Lake and Walker River for centuries.

al objects such as plants, animals and landforms. Historically, members were hunters and gatherers

cenic byway and a cultural center that houses tribal artifacts.

The Western Shoshone’s land originally included central Nevada, southern Idaho, parts of northwest Utah and the Death Valley area of California. The tribe often divided into smaller extended family groups and lived in areas where they could hunt and gather to sustain themselves.

Four Nevada bands — the Elko Colony, Battle Mountain Colony, Wells Colony and South Fork Reservation — united to form the Te-Moak Tribe, which adopted a constitution recognized by the federal government in 1938.

The Te-Moak Tribe is based in Elko. The Duckwater Shoshone Tribe lives in northern Nye County.

## Hualapai Tribe

(Across the border in Arizona)

Located in northwest Arizona, the Hualapai are a federally recognized tribe with a reservation that includes 1 million acres along the Grand Canyon and Colorado River. The tribe's economic drivers are tourism, cattle ranching, and arts and crafts.

There is no gaming on the reservation. Instead, the tribe operates Grand Canyon West, which offers tour packages and Grand Canyon views from a glass bridge called the Skywalk. The tribe also owns Hualapai River Runners, a rafting company on the Colorado River.

A total of 1,621 people live on the reservation, which includes Peach Springs, about 55 miles east of Kingman.

Ashley Noelle Hill, left, a graduate of Southeast Career and Technical Academy and a biological science major at UNLV, is a Lakota of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe and is one-sixteenth Choctaw of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

In January, Hill, 20, an ambassador for Native American students on campus, was named Miss Native UNLV. She shared her thoughts with The Sunday about what it means to be Native American.

I've often been hesitant to claim my Native roots and am unsure if it's even okay for me to claim that heritage. I grew up in the Nevada foster care system, and I grew up without a strong connection to my Native culture. Even now, with a clear knowledge of my tribal connections, I continue to have little feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and a sense that there are things I ought to know that no one ever taught me. I have a strong connection with my past.

Immersed in my Lakota culture from youth, I am lucky enough to know and appreciate that Native identity especially with an awareness of the cosmic connections, not only from person to person but also from the land to the people.

A diverse set of people. We are comprised of many different ethnic groups with rich cultures and a strong connection, community and inclusion. Everyone has a role, and everyone is important. That's the way.

It has never been more important. As I see disconnection in the world, I've found myself gravitating towards where there is comfort in a community where everyone sees themselves as part of whole. We all want to be in sync with our world and ourselves; native culture provides that.

I am a first-generation college student in my family. I firmly believe knowledge is the most important thing in this life, and I am eager to take advantage of the educational benefits offered to Native American students like myself. I also am incredibly thankful to my heritage for providing me the keys to my success. I invite and encourage my native brothers and sisters to step forward to learn about their Native heritage and its extraordinary people and culture.

0 Comments

Las Vegas Sun

1 Login

Recommend 1

Tweet

Share

Sort by Best



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

Be the first to comment.

dd  Disqus' Privacy PolicyPrivacy PolicyPrivacy

These 17 Senior Rebates Now

an save more money with senior citizen  
2018



Report ad

You may like

Bring the Moon Out of the Night Sky to Your Home

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Fuzz Online

## **If You Own a Home in Nevada You May Be Entitled to \$3,500**

Comparisons.org

## **New Rule in North Las Vegas, NV**

Comparisons.org

## **Blood Sugar? Why Did No One Tell You About This?**

Glucocil

## **Celebrated Doctor Recommends This For Better Knees**

Instaflex Advanced

**We Hope You Know This Easy Tip**

[ed at officers](#)  
[altered, fabricated](#)  
[crash](#)

[Las Vegas Paiutes to open second marijuana dispensary with drive-thru](#)  
[6 things to know about the plan to save the ailing Colorado River](#)

[Complete Listing »](#)  
[Featured Galleries](#)



[NoMad Hotel Preview Tour](#)



[Man Dead After Firing At Officers](#)





15 Mon





[Vegas! The Show](#)

Saxe Theater



[Mindfreak Live!](#)

Luxor Theater

[Sexxy](#)

Westgate Las Vegas & Casino

[All events on Thursday »](#)



Locally owned and independent since 1950; Winner of the [Pulitzer Prize for Public Service](#), [best news website in the nation](#) & [DuPont Award for broadcast journalism](#)

© Las Vegas Sun, 2018, All Rights Reserved